

Gender, Technical Innovation, and Gu Family Embroidery in Late-Ming Shanghai*

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Abstract: This paper takes Gu Family embroidery as a case study to discuss the contribution of technical innovation to the construction of gender in late imperial China so as to better understand Guxiu in its technical, social, and artistic contexts. Focusing on the *Flowers and Fishes* album (dated 1641, Shanghai Museum) by Han Ximeng, I argue that Gu family ladies, such as Han Ximeng, used embroidery as a means to display their individual creativity; and, further, by means of technical innovations, contributed not only to their family finances but also to the art and culture of late Ming Shanghai. While some of the technical innovations that the Gu family ladies achieved were driven by the desire to meet the literati aesthetic of their time, eventually, in the case of Han Ximeng, she went beyond the literati taste for 'painting-like' embroidery to assert the special qualities of embroidery. By affirming her own authorship, drawing attention to the feminine medium in which she worked and claiming the significance of her work with a carefully chosen subject, Han subverted the conventions of male painting in subtle ways and demonstrated her subjectivity.

In traditional Chinese society, embroidery, often referred to as *nügong* 女紅 (conventionally translated as 'womanly work' or 'women's work'), was

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among the textile skills that women, regardless of social status, were supposed to learn. As a common and practical skill, it contributed to the construction of gender, challenged the traditional notion of 'innovation,' and gave shape and meaning to women's lives in imperial China. Modern scholars, however, have had difficulty in conceptualizing embroidery as a subject of historical analysis, making it perhaps the least-examined subject among the already less-studied field of textile arts.

One of the common misconceptions about embroidery in imperial China is that it is often conceived of as merely an art of the boudoir (*gui-gexiu* 閨閣繡)—that is, an elite women's pastime or young girls' preparation for their dowry. However, professional embroiderers long existed to fulfill the elite demand for embroidered official clothes and decorations, as is attested by texts and by excavated embroideries of exquisite quality produced by imperial workshops throughout China's history. From at least the Song dynasty (960-1279) the imperial court established institutions to organize the production of embroidered clothes and decorations for royal families and officials.¹ For example, in 1104 the Song court established the Embroidery Office (*Wenxiu yuan* 文繡院), which employed three hundred embroiderers.² And there were certainly male embroiderers among the professionals. During the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the Adornment Service (*Wenxiu ju* 文繡局) in Fujian employed both male and female embroiderers which caused concern among moralistic local officials.³ Here the appearance of male producers in professional embroidery may be taken as a sign of labor demand (intensity) or possibly specialization.

Another misconception about embroidery is related to the first one. Because embroidery traditionally was considered a boudoir art, scholars have emphasized that embroidery was not made for commercial profit. In her study of women's handicrafts in the Ningbo area during the early twentieth century, Susan Mann posits that embroidery arts—"the hallmark of late Qing domesticity"—were commercialized for the first time as a result of foreign missionaries' demand and the middle-class women who

¹ The history of embroidery production in China and the institutional support for it are topics that deserve more attention. Zhu Qiqian 朱啓鈐 (1872-1964) in his *Sixiu biji* 絲繡筆記 (c. 1928a) collected some material ("Lidai sixiu guanjiang zhi zhidu" 歷代絲繡官匠之制度, *juan* A, pp. 10a-16a): these need to be re-examined and critically evaluated.

² See *Song shi* (1977), *juan* 165, p. 3918; *Jiuchao biannian beiyao* (1983), *juan* 27, p. 3b. The Jin dynasty also had an Embroidery Office (*Wenxiu shu* 文繡署). See Charles O. Hucker (1985), p. 566.

³ *Yuan shi* (1983), *juan* 181, p. 17b; *Xin Yuan shi* (1955), *juan* 214, *liezhuan* 111, pp. 2b-3a. See also Zhao Feng 趙豐 (ed.) (2005), pp. 362-363.

"formerly had embroidered just to pass the time" began to enter into the commercial market.⁴ Similar arguments also have been made regarding the Gu Family embroidery (or Guxiu 顧繡) of late-Ming Shanghai, the focus of this paper. The Gu Family embroidery has long been considered the epitome of later Chinese pictorial textiles. Works by the ladies of this literati family such as Han Ximeng 韓希孟 (fl. 1634-1641) are taken to represent the highest achievement of this art form. As one of the most prestigious, keenly sought-after luxury objects, the Gu Family embroidery attracted numerous contemporary and later emulators and counterfeiters. Eventually 'Guxiu' became a generic name for luxury decorative embroidery produced in the lower Yangzi region.⁵ It has been suggested that the best and finest of the Gu Family embroidery made by Han Ximeng was art exclusively for art's sake, and that only in later times Guxiu became commercialized, leading to a decline in the quality of the embroidery.⁶ As I have argued elsewhere, Gu Family embroidery already had entered the domestic market during Han Ximeng's lifetime.⁷

In order to better understand Guxiu in its technical, social, and artistic contexts, I now shall take Gu Family embroidery as a case study to discuss the contribution of technical innovation to the construction of gender in late imperial China. In the following discussion I focus on the *Flowers and Fishes* album (dated 1641) by Han Ximeng, now in the Shanghai Museum collections. In its present format, it comprises four elegantly embroidered leaves, each about 30.3 centimeters in height and 23.9 centimeters in width, followed by two long colophons written by the Ming dynasty scholar-connoisseurs Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636, written in 1636) and Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608-1647, written in 1639) together with a colophon by a

⁴ Mann (1992), pp. 258-260.

⁵ See Weidner (1988), Ko (1994), pp. 173-175 and Clunas (1997), p. 185 for a brief introduction to Gu Family embroidery. For updated Chinese scholarship on Guxiu see Shanghai bowuguan (2010) and the two recent monographs: Bao and Yu (2009) and Yang Xinji 楊鑫基 et al. (2011). Huang Yifen 黃逸芬 (2010) offers a revisionist account of the Gu family and the embroidery, based on a vast array of previously untapped primary sources. See also Swislocki (2008) for a contextualized case study of another Gu family specialty product.

⁶ The 2006 statement nominating Guxiu as intangible cultural heritage of China best represents this view of Gu Family embroidery as a pure, commercial-free art pursuit; see, http://www.ihchina.cn/inc/guojiaminglunry.jsp?gjml_id=316 (the official website administered by Chinese Academy of Arts, under the supervision of Ministry of Culture, P. R. China). Recent studies by curators of the Shanghai Museum continue to make similar argument. See, for example, Shi Yuan 施遠 (2007), p. 10.

⁷ I-Fen Huang (2009).

modern collector—Tan Guancheng 譚觀成 (fl. first half of twentieth century, written in 1948).⁸

In this paper I shall argue that Gu family ladies, such as Han Ximeng, used embroidery as a means to display their individual creativity; and, further, by means of technical innovations, contributed not only to their family finances but also to the art and culture of late Ming Shanghai.⁹ And I shall show that, even more extraordinarily, their productive and creative roles were recognized by contemporary and later male literati and the general public. I have divided my analysis of core issues into two parts. First I place the embroidery techniques of Guxiu in the contexts of the technical development of embroidered paintings (*xiuhua* 繡畫) from the Song dynasty onward. Then, I analyze the colophons by Dong and Chen; I discuss the cultural contexts in which Gu Family embroidery was favorably received by late-Ming literati; and, I examine the dynamics between the literati-collectors' aesthetic and the Gu family ladies' technical innovations. I argue that some of the technical innovations that the Gu family ladies achieved were driven by the desire to meet the literati aesthetic of their time. More importantly, in the case of Han Ximeng, I shall argue that her motive was to go beyond the literati taste for 'painting-like' embroidery to assert the special qualities of embroidery and of her own work of Guxiu as 'Ms. Han's embroidery.'

The Technical Innovation of Guxiu in Historical Context

Contrary to the lot of most women in late imperial China—a situation that Francesca Bray characterizes as “restricted to the worst rewarded and technically least demanding tasks”¹⁰—the Gu family ladies thrived in their innovation of embroidery techniques. As Dorothy Ko points out in her epilogue, the traditional narrow notion of “innovation” as the invention of an ingenious individual often excluded women. But if we expand our definition of innovation to include “re-assemblages of certain kinds of local

⁸ Dong's and Chen's colophons shall be discussed below. It is not clear when and how this album came to be in current format. What is certain is that this album was in the renowned Duanfang 端方 (1861-1911) collection in its current format and published in the *Zhongguo minghua* 中國名畫 series of Youzheng shuju 有正書局 in 1917. For a brief introduction to and reproduction of the entire album, including the embroideries and colophons, see Shanghai bowuguan 上海博物館 (2007), pp. 96-103.

⁹ Dorothy Ko has made similar points based on different materials. See Ko (1994), pp. 172-176.

¹⁰ Bray (1997), p. 236.

knowledge," we can see that in those areas of social practice in which women dominated, they did use new methods, conceive of new ideas and create new products. Women were also innovators.¹¹ In terms of embroidery techniques, the Gu family ladies continued traditions established in Song embroidery and pushed them to a new level of technical sophistication. Their innovations are two-fold: first, the Gu family ladies invented new techniques and strategies—such as splitting silk threads into finer filaments, using new color combinations, and inventing new stitches—to create an even more intense feel of painterly qualities; secondly, they developed new ways of stressing the materiality of embroidery as a piece of needlework. Gu family ladies creatively employed couching stitches (*dingxian xiu* 釘線繡) to enhance the range of the nuanced light and shadow effects in their work. They also developed new special decorative stitches to simulate the textures of different objects depicted in their embroideries. As a result, in the eyes of their admirers, their embroideries "look like a painting," or even "surpass the painting."

Although in modern scholarly literature Gu Family embroidery often is characterized as *huaxiu* 畫繡, or 'pictorial embroidery,'¹² an historically more accurate term is *xiuhua* 繡畫, 'embroidered painting.' Hence at the outset of my discussion of Gu family ladies' technical innovations, it is helpful to look briefly at the development of embroidery techniques in China prior to the late Ming period.

Embroidery as a decorative technique has existed in China at least since the Western Zhou period (c. 1050-771 BC). The earliest archaeological examples of embroidered textile are clay impressions of chain-stitched embroidery discovered in a Western Zhou elite tomb at Rujiashuang 茹家莊, Baoji 寶雞 in Shaanxi Province.¹³ Extant embroideries from early China mostly are of a decorative character; they feature repeat-patterns and usually are applied to objects of practical use (such as clothing).¹⁴ A good example is a fragment of embroidery that displays a phoenix and flower design, also embroidered in chain stitch, that was excavated from Mashan

¹¹ See Dorothy Ko's epilogue in this volume.

¹² See, for example, Xu Weinan 徐蔚南 (1936), p. 5.

¹³ Lu Liancheng 盧連成 and Hu Zhisheng 胡志生 (1988).

¹⁴ In addition, there are limited textual records that indicate other functions of descriptive embroideries. For instance, Lady Zhao is said to have embroidered a map for the King of Wu for military purposes. See *Shiyiji* (1983), *juan* 8, p. 2b. The same story also appeared in Tang dynasty Zhang Yanyuan's 張彥遠 account, see *Lidai minghua ji* (1983), *juan* 4, p. 6a.

馬山 No. 1, the Warring States-period Chu tomb (c. fourth to third century BC, at modern-day Jiangling 江陵, Hubei province).¹⁵

The earliest extant sample of embroideries with pictorial design is a fragment of a hanging found between the Mogao 莫高 caves 125 and 126 at Dunhuang, Gansu province, dated to 487 AD. Unlike the phoenix and flower at Mashan which are repeated decorative patterns, the Mogao hanging is a stitched picture that depicts Prince Guangyang 廣陽王 of the Northern Wei and two other donors.¹⁶ It too is embroidered in chain stitch, which completely covers the entire silk ground. Another Dunhuang textile, *Shakyamuni Preaching on the Vulture Peak* (Figure 1), now in the British Museum collections, exemplifies the technical sophistication that was attained during the Tang dynasty (618-906).¹⁷ Although only one major type of stitch was used (split stitch, giving a visual effect similar to chain stitch but more easily worked), the embroiderer was able to achieve a variety of surface textures by making stitches of varied length and density, by varying the orientation of the stitching—vertical, horizontal; leftward diagonal; rightward diagonal; arched, and coiled—as well as by means of subtle variations in color (Figure 2). Although these Dunhuang examples have a clear pictorial design and often are seen as the precursor to the later embroidered painting, they differ in terms of embroidery techniques.¹⁸

Pictorial embroidery developed into a type of non-functional aesthetic object that began to seek ‘painting-like’ qualities during the Northern Song period (960-1127). Three major technological developments took place in Song embroidery: first, in terms of embroidery technique, satin stitches (*pingzhen* 平針) became popular and gradually replaced the classical chain stitch and split stitch.¹⁹ The satin-stitch group includes stitches that are arranged in flat rows of silk threads parallel to one another so that there is

¹⁵ Gao Hanyu 高漢玉 and Bao Mingxin 包銘新 (eds.) (1986), plate 7, pp. 27, 42, 232. Hubeisheng Jingzhou diqu bowuguan 湖北省荊州地區博物館 (1985), color plates 28-1, 28-2, fig. 56 (drawing), p. 68.

¹⁶ Gao and Bao (1986), plate 34, pp. 64, 233.

¹⁷ Zhao Feng (ed.) (2007), pp. 218-219.

¹⁸ Yu Ying and others have suggested a middle step in the development from pictorial embroidery to embroidered painting during the late Tang and Five Dynasties period, based on other embroideries discovered in Dunhuang and now in the British Museum. Yu Ying 于穎 (2008), pp. 48-49. More research is needed to clarify the technical development during this transitional period.

¹⁹ Satin stitches appeared prior to Song dynasty. On fragments excavated from Dunhuang (now in the British Museum) dated to late Tang to Five dynasties, as well as Tang-datable examples at Shosoin, satin stitches were already used. Yet it is during the Song dynasty that satin stitches became a dominant embroidery technique.

no obvious gap or overlap of threads between them. The visual effect of these satin stitches is that the embroidered images look smooth and flat, which is significantly different from that of the chain stitch and split stitch, which produced a raised outline effect.

Secondly, Song embroiderers utilized much finer silk threads than those of previous periods. For example, on the *Shakyamuni Preaching on the Vulture Peak* in the British Museum, the silk thread is twisted and visibly thicker,²⁰ while the silk threads that Song embroiderers used often are untwisted silk floss, of a width about 0.05 cm (some thicker ones could range from 0.06-0.08 cm).²¹ The visual effect of these tightly arranged extremely fine threads is that they are so closely and thinly applied to the ground silk that they almost look like a layer of ink and colors on silk or paper. Moreover, by using such fine threads, embroiderers also easily could create subtle shading of colors.

Third, in terms of pictorial design, Song embroiderers began to create a clear contrast between their embroidered images and the plain, blank ground. Thus the embroiderer's use of needle and color threads to embroider images on a blank silk is similar to a painter's use of brush and ink and color to paint images on silk or paper. This distinction between image and ground is drastically different from the previous practice in which the entire silk was usually covered with stitches. This suggests a fundamental change in the way that pictorial embroidery was conceived – no longer was it conceived in analogy to woven textiles; rather it was conceived in relation to the art of painting. This conceptual change, in turn, added a new dimension to embroidery: it had been considered decorative ornament but now it also could be considered as “painting” in its own right. Along with this transformation, the subject matters of Song embroidery also expanded beyond religious figures to include more secular painting genres such as bird-and-flower, architecture, and landscape. Examples of Song embroidery such as the *Female Immortal Riding a Crane to the Jade Terrace* (Figure 3), now in the Liaoning Provincial Museum, share the style and favored format (round fan) of Song court painting. This was the birth

²⁰ The width of the thread is not mentioned, but it is relatively thicker than those of Song embroidery. See British Museum website: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectId=764759&partid=1&searchText=preaching+vulture+peak&numpages=10&orig=%2fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx¤tPage=1.

²¹ Zhao Feng (ed.) (2005), p. 304. In comparison, threads from the aforementioned Mashan Tomb are of a width ranging from 0.15-0.4 cm, mostly 0.15-0.25 cm. See Gao and Bao (1986), p. 27.

of a special genre of pictorial embroidery – what late Ming connoisseurs later called *xiuhua*, ‘embroidery painting.’

Certainly, pictorial embroidery remained in great demand at court and outside of the palace for various religious and secular purposes and a variety of techniques were applied. The practice of embroidering Buddhist subjects continued to flourish during the Yuan and the Ming (1368-1644) dynasties. Buddhist believers used embroidery to express their religious devotion.²² They made embroidered Buddhist images and sutras, the latter often also bearing images of Buddha preaching. At the Ming court, especially during the Yongle reign-period (1403-1424), large-scale embroidered Thangkas were produced as imperial gifts. While outside the court, many embroideries of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, Guanyin, Dharma, and arhats were made in colored threads or sometimes with hair.²³

From this brief survey of technical and thematic developments in Chinese embroidery, it is clear that embroiderers had increased their technical capacity to produce pictorial effects and that patrons desired a widening range of embroidered, painting-like, pictures (some adopting formats associated with (then) modern painting, such as round fan). The great challenge for the embroiderer became to find ways to reduce the volume (no matter how tiny they already are) of silk threads to emulate two-dimensional ink and colors, which can be blended seamlessly, through the medium of water, with the ground silk or paper. Prior to the Tang period (618-907), embroideries, like other textiles, readily exhibit the textures that were produced by their particular means of facture – that is threads, weaves, and stitches. The embroiderers did not make any attempt to conceal the texture of textiles and the traces of the needle. All the elements involved in making them – from the thick threads, to the textured stitching (mostly chain stitch or split stitch), to the ways stitches were combined and arranged – all remind a viewer that it is a piece of textile. In order to acquire ‘painting-like’ qualities, Song embroiderers, in contrast, started to respond to this challenge by employing the smoother and flatter satin-stitches as their major technique and by using split finer threads. These strategies proved to be effective: Song embroideries began to look more like paintings, especially like the court paintings which they emulated.

We now return to the late Ming period and Guxiu. In order to give their embroidery an even more vivid ‘painting-like’ quality, Gu family ladies not only employed the strategies that they inherited from Song embroiderers, but also went one step further. First, the threads used in Gu Family embroidery are extremely fine, untwisted threads that were split into even

²² Sheng Yuyun 盛餘韻 (2003).

²³ For hair embroidery see Yuhang Li’s essay in this volume.

finer filaments. Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558-1639), who was a connoisseur, critic and artist and a Gu family friend, recorded in the Songjiang gazetteer of 1630 that in the Songjiang area “in the past, there were floss embroideries and Kesi silk tapestry. Now split fine floss is used in embroidery, which produces painting-like liveliness.”²⁴ The development of textile technology also enabled the Gu family ladies to use silk threads finer than those that were available to their Song-period predecessors. It is reported that during the Ming dynasty a silk thread could be split into a maximum of 36 filaments.²⁵ Since only one or two filaments of silk floss were used to embroider, the bulk of the embroidery medium is reduced to the minimum: the resulting application looks smooth and flat on the surface, and the textures of the woven silk ground and the applied embroidered images blend seamlessly. These finer threads also helped to achieve smoother gradations of color shading.

Secondly, in terms of the availability of colored silks, the Songjiang gazetteer also recorded that during the Ming period, there was a significant increase in the amount of available colors and colored silk in the Songjiang area.²⁶ Consequently the Gu Family embroidery’s color palette is richer than was that of the Song; and, the Gu ladies were able to use and produce more intermediate shades.

Third, as for stitching, the encroaching satin stitch (*qiang zhen* 戗針, for block shading, Diagram 1) and long-and-short stitch (*tao zhen* 套針, Diagram 2) which were the most-used stitches in Song embroidery were developed further into double- or multiple-pair long-and-short stitches (*shuangtao zhen* 雙套針, Diagram 3) as well as irregular long-and-short stitches (*can zhen* 摻針 or *souhe zhen* 撮和針, Diagram 4). The visual effect of this technical innovation is that there are more intermediate colors between two colors of the silk threads. Thus color shading could be done with more nuanced effects. The combination of all these techniques enabled the Gu family ladies to create extremely smooth and subtle color gradation so that the naturalistic effects of color shading achieved in painting with pigments could be presented in embroidery.

Fourth, Gu family ladies developed more ways to further incorporate painting techniques into embroidery. Song embroiderers had experimented with applying colors and ink to their work. For example, in the aforementioned *Female Immortal Riding a Crane to the Jade Terrace*, the clouds

²⁴ *Songjiang fuzhi* (1630), *juan* 7, p. 26b.

²⁵ In comparison, modern silk threads are of the similar quality as that of the Ming, and a thread can be split into a maximum of 48 filaments. See Bao Yanli 包燕麗 and Yu Ying 于穎 (2009), p. 159.

²⁶ *Songjiang fuzhi* (1630), *juan* 7, p. 27a-27b.

are accentuated with white powder along their contours. In Gu Family embroidery this Song experiment was developed into a salient feature for which the Gu are famous. There are roughly three ways in which they integrated painting and embroidery: 1) first paint and then embroider in order to ‘borrow’ colors from the silk ground; 2) paint directly on the embroidered images; 3) add ink or color wash to the silk ground.²⁷ Sometimes these techniques are blended so harmoniously that it is hard to distinguish one from the other.

In addition to their efforts to make their embroideries appear to be more painterly, Gu family ladies also pursued the opposite direction—that is, they emphasized the special qualities that embroidery possessed. The natural luster of silk threads is the most prominent characteristic of embroidery. Tang embroiderers already had exhibited a sophisticated method of playing with light by changing the direction, length, and density of stitches in order to exploit the different reflections of the silks’ luster. By means of innovatively applying satin stitches, Gu family ladies found ways to achieve and to improve on what Tang embroiderers had accomplished with split stitches. In the leaf depicting fish at play (Figure 4) in the *Flowers and Fishes* album from the Shanghai Museum, Han Ximeng used dark green threads to embroider the duckweed. By slightly adjusting the directions and angles of stitches, she turned the same threads into different shades of green ranging from silver white to dark green as viewers move their gaze.²⁸ The changing sheen on the duckweed produces the effects of movement, as if the duckweed were floating on the water. The catfish and the carp also were embroidered using the same method to give vivid effects of the movement and the shining scales of the fish.

Gu family ladies also creatively used couching stitches to fix the silk thread to the ground in order to produce the desirable reflective sheen of the thread. The couching stitch (Diagram 5) had been widely used since the Tang dynasty.²⁹ Many embroideries excavated from the crypt of the Famen Temple 法門寺 near Xi’an are couched in gold metallic thread.³⁰ As the name suggests, the couching stitch originally was done by laying one (main)

²⁷ Shi Yuan (2010).

²⁸ This has been pointed out by Yu Ying (2010), p. 63.

²⁹ The earliest extant example of couching stitch, some argued, came from a much earlier tomb: the middle Warring-States period Chu Tomb at Wangshan 望山, Jiangling (c. fourth century BC, in present-day Hubei province). See Gao Hanyu 高漢玉 (1996), p. 341.

³⁰ For color plates of these embroideries see Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan 陝西省考古研究院 et al. (eds.) (2007), color plates 242-246. For an English introduction of these embroideries see Han Jingke (translated by Angela Sheng 2006).

thread flat and stitching it down with another thread at intervals in order to secure the main thread in position; and, by extension, it can be used to 'draw' a design. Previously this technique often was used to affix to the surface of the silk ground unstitchable threads, such as gold metallic thread, yet Han Ximeng expanded its application (Figure 5) in order to fine tune the angle of a curve of a thread, to affix stitchable colored threads by twisting them, or to adjust the angle of reflection in order to produce a subtle sheen and color gradation.³¹

The Gu family ladies also developed special stitches to better simulate the different textures of objects. For instance, Han Ximeng used hairy stitch (*shi zhen* 施針 or *shimao zhen* 施毛針, Diagram 6) for the fur of squirrels, crackle stitch (*bingwen zhen* 冰紋針, Diagram 7) to emulate dragonflies' wings, scale-carving stitch for fish, and so on. In addition, the Gu ladies used a variety of special overlaid stitches (*jinwen xiu* 錦紋繡, Diagrams 8 and 8.1) to replicate various intricate designs on clothing and other fabrics.

All these stitches were used skilfully by the Gu family ladies to achieve their desired visual effects and were never used rigidly. A leaf from Han Ximeng's *Flowers and Fishes* album (Figure 6) at the Shanghai Museum exemplifies how she took into consideration the overall visual effect of the final product as she embroidered each part of it. This leaf features a complicated design: An exquisite Tai Lake rock stands on a slope with several stalks of pinkish white dianthus surrounding it. Two butterflies flutter above the flowers. The lower left corner of the album is the most intricate of all: here, flowers stand in front of and behind the perforated Tai Lake rock. Thus the flowers in the back can be seen through the holes of the rock. This type of intricate design is generally unsuitable for embroidery design because of the limited tools embroiderers have to create these complicated distinctions. Lesser embroiderers run the risk of mingling everything together and end up with a messy, flat, or disordered picture. In a nineteenth century embroidery manual, *Xiupu* 繡譜 (Treatise on Embroidery, preface dated 1821), author Ding Pei 丁佩, herself a renowned embroiderer, advises her fellow embroiderers to keep the composition simple and to delete unnecessary details (*shan er you shan* 刪而又刪).³² Han Ximeng successfully delivered such an intricate design by means of meticulously calculated and skillfully arranged stitches. Rocks are worked in irregular long and short stitches, the most common stitch in Gu Family embroidery repertoire. But contrary to its usual application in making a smooth transition of colors, here the stitch is used to highlight the contrast between the dark and bright surfaces of the Tai Lake rock resulting from its concave shape. The flowers (Figure 7) are embroidered with stitches of

³¹ Bao and Yu (2009), pp. 92-93.

³² *Xiupu* (1821), p. 227.

different density, and the pink color painted on the ground silk prior to embroidering comes through at areas where the stitches run sparse, which, together with the sheen of the silk floss, produce visual effects of the subtle movement and the liveliness of the flowers.³³

It is worth noting that different from the traditional individualist notion of “innovation,” the technical innovation of Gu Family embroidery was created within the community of the Gu family ladies. While it is tempting to attribute all these innovations to Han Ximeng as modern scholars came to know her best because her signed works survived, the technical innovations discussed above were not all invented by her alone. The recent rediscovery of the work of another Gu family lady, Miao Ruiyun 繆瑞雲, gives us a glimpse of how techniques were passed on and reinvented among different generations in this community. In an album of miscellaneous subjects (Shanghai Museum), where Miao also signed her name in the form of embroidered seal, not only motifs and style similar to those of Han’s works can be seen, but also almost all of the aforementioned techniques were used in one way or another.³⁴ This in fact helps decisively in identifying her as the concubine (i.e. Gu ji 顧姬, or Née Miao 繆氏) of a second-generation Gu family son Jiying 箕英, whom researchers for a long time had only known through text as the famed Gu family embroiderer one generation before Han.³⁵ Careful analysis and comparison of their works shows that in many ways Han Ximeng inherited techniques pioneered by Miao yet used them differently or improved these techniques.³⁶ It is entirely possible that the Gu Family ladies worked together, shared their knowledge, and innovated in this community.

³³ Bao and Yu (2009), p. 103.

³⁴ For the plates of and a preliminary introduction to this work, see Shanghai bowuguan (ed.) (2007), pp. 34-47.

³⁵ There are a few contemporary records about this “Gu ji” or “Miao shi.” Tan Yuanchun 譚元春 (1586-1637), leading poet of late Ming, described how he marveled at Gu ji’s embroidered arhats in 1619. See *Tan Youxia heji* (1997), *juan* 18, pp. 15a-15b. Another late Ming scholar Jiang Shaoshu 姜紹書 in his accounts of Ming painters praised Gu ji’s excellent artistic skills in embroidery and commented on her works as “possessing spirit consonance” (*da you shengyun* 大有生韻) and her calligraphy “having method” (*youfa* 有法). See *Wushengshi shi* (1991), *juan* 7, p. 34. According to Qin Rongguang 秦榮光 (1840-1904), a Shanghai native who devoted much effort to local history, early Qing scholar Dai Youqi 戴有祺 (?-1711, *jinshi* 1691) in his poetry collection *Xunlezhai ji* 尋樂齋集 has a poem about an embroidered Buddhist image by Née Miao and noted that “the Guxiu of Shanghai started with Née Miao.” See *Shanghai xian zhuzhi ci* (2007), p. 52.

³⁶ See Yu Ying’s detailed analysis in Bao and Yu (2009), pp. 102-110.

The Reception of Guxiu in Late Ming and Early Qing

Thus, following the technical traditions of embroidered painting established since the Song dynasty, the Gu family ladies pushed the embroidery techniques of emulating painting to a new level. Their efforts were endorsed enthusiastically by contemporary art critics, scholars and collectors. The reasons why the Gu family ladies' works were readily accepted by male literati are because: 1) the visual effects of the Gu family ladies' technical innovations fit well into the aesthetic pursuit of Song and Yuan paintings and 'painting-like' Song embroidery among late Ming literati; 2) embroidery skill and innovation signaled female talent during the late Ming, and the late Ming popular recognition of talented women created a favorite atmosphere for the reception of Gu Family embroidery.

Although Ming scholars and connoisseurs debated the relative value of Song and Yuan paintings, as Craig Clunas points out, for average elite collectors, both Song and Yuan paintings were highly valued and keenly sought out.³⁷ This is why the Gu family emphasized that their embroideries were based on Song and Yuan master paintings. In a long colophon attached to the *Song Yuan mingji fangce* 宋元名蹟方冊 (Album [of Eight Embroideries] of Famous Song and Yuan Paintings), the best known work of Han Ximeng in our time in the Palace Museum in Beijing, Han's husband Gu Shouqian 顧壽潛 (fl. 1634) emphasized the tremendous effort that his wife had put into creating the album. His colophon reads, in part:

In the spring of the *jiaxu* year [1634], she searched for celebrated paintings of the Song and Yuan dynasties, copied eight of them, embroidered them one by one, and made them into the album. Everyone who saw it became speechless and was astonished. They had never seen [anything like this] before. But they did not know that she had put her mind and her skill in it, had devoted painstaking efforts day and night, and had spent years of effort.³⁸

Gu Shouqian's claim notwithstanding, a survey of the visual resources that the Gu Family embroidery used in their production indicates that besides a few Song and Yuan master paintings, the Gu family also utilized contemporary Ming figure paintings, woodblock prints, and popular auspicious images ('shapes of good fortune') that might attract potential buyers.³⁹

³⁷ For the Ming views on Song and Yuan painting, see Cahill (1982), pp. 7-12, Nelson (1983), and Clunas (2004), p. 70.

³⁸ For color plate of this colophon, see Shanghai bowuguan (2007), p. 32.

³⁹ I-Fen Huang (2006); Shi Yuan (2010).

Therefore, this emphasis on modeling Song and Yuan painting is only one of the strategies that the Gu family employed to promote their brand of embroidery. And this strategy worked. As Gu Shouqian recorded, his teacher Dong Qichang “saw them and praised it (the album) wholeheartedly, asking me: ‘Have her skills attained such heights?’”

Gu Family embroidery fed the late Ming collectors’ hunger for Song embroidery. The late Ming fetish for Song paintings also extended to Song embroidery. In his ‘Discourse on the pure enjoyment of cultured idleness,’ one of his *Eight Discourses on the Art of Living* (*Zunsheng ba jian* 遵生八牋, published 1591), Gao Lian 高濂 discussed the connoisseurship and collecting of painting, and treated embroidery as painting (calling it *xiuhua*, ‘embroidery painting,’ rather than the modern term *huaxiu*, ‘pictorial embroidery’). In assessing the great quality of Song embroidery, he wrote:

For Song embroidery painting, [be it] landscape, figures, architecture, or flowers and birds, the stitches and the threads are so fine and tight that one cannot see any edges or seams. The thread used consists of no more than one or two filaments and the needle is thin as hair. [These embroideries] are thus exquisite and subtle. The coloring of the embroidery is even superior to that of painting since the sheen of the thread is dazzling. The spirit and liveliness [of the object depicted] are all there when you look at it. All the three kinds of delight (*san qu*) are present. [Even if] the spring wind had ten fingers, it would not be able to compete with the ingenuity of the womanly work.

又如宋人繡畫，山水、人物、樓臺、花鳥，針線細密，不露邊縫，其用絨止一二絲，用針如髮細者為之，故多精妙。設色開染，較畫更佳，以其絨色光彩奪目，丰神生意，望之宛然，三趣悉備。女紅之巧，十指春風，迴不可及。⁴⁰

To Gao, Song embroidery is the epitome of the textile art of all time, and the very reason for that is because of its ‘painting-like’ quality, which is achieved at least partly by hiding the traces of the needle. In addition, in Gao Lian’s system of aesthetic evaluation, embroidery is also judged according to the criteria he established for painting; that is, the ‘three kinds of delight’: ‘heavenly delight’ (*tianqu* 天趣), ‘human delight’ (*renqu* 人趣), and ‘delight of/ in the “object” or “thing”’ (*wuqu* 物趣). The first emphasizes that painting should capture the spirit of the object depicted, the second its liveliness, and the third its formal likeness. Other Ming

⁴⁰ *Zunsheng ba jian* (1983), *juan* 15, pp. 12b-13a.

connoisseurs, such as Zhang Yingwen 張應文 (fl. 1530-1594) in his *Pure and Arcane Collecting* (*Qing bi cang* 清秘藏, author's preface dated 1595) and Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585-1645) in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things* (*Zhangwu zhi* 長物志, dated to about 1615-1620) echoed Gao's judgment and evaluation of Song embroidery. Wen Zhenheng, a grandson of the great Ming scholar-painter Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470-1559), detailed the reasons why Song embroideries should be highly cherished and why no serious collector could deem his painting collection complete unless he owned a piece or two of this type of embroidery:

The needlework of Song embroidery is fine and tight, the coloring exquisite, and the luster bedazzles the eye. The embroidered landscapes have clearly distinguished foregrounds and backgrounds and the buildings appear to be three-dimensional. Human figures all have a feeling of liveliness to their countenance. The flowers are graceful to the extreme and the birds appear to be chirping and feeding. One must collect a couple of pieces [of this type of embroidery] so as to complete one's collection of painting.

宋繡針線細密，設色精妙，光彩射目，山水分遠近之趣，樓閣得深邃之體，人物具瞻眺生動之情，花鳥極綽約嚙啖之態。不可不蓄一二幅，以備畫中一種。⁴¹

Here, Wen Zhenheng is very much in line with Gao Lian and Zhang Yingwen. In fact, the passage quoted above is an almost verbatim paraphrase of remarks by Gao and Zhang. The only difference is the last sentence, which is particularly relevant for our discussion of the value of Song embroidery. As a member of a highly-esteemed literati family in Suzhou during the Ming dynasty and as a descendant of Wen Zhengming, Wen Zhenheng's statement about painting collections is probably more representative of the elite view. That Wen mandated that any serious collector must own Song embroidery paintings to complete his painting collection is a good indication of the high status that this type of work enjoyed among late Ming literati. This attitude toward Song embroidery probably helped to increase the popularity and market value of Song embroidery.

However, as Gao Lian pointed out, there were limited quantities of Song embroidery circulating in the late Ming art market, making them difficult to get. In the National Palace Museum, Taipei, there are two albums of embroidered birds and flowers that were traditionally dated to the Song dynasty. Each of these albums includes one leaf bearing an embroidered inscription attributing the source image to Huang Quan 黃筌

⁴¹ *Zhangwu zhi* (1983), *juan* 5, p. 8b.

(tenth century), the renowned bird-and-flower painter active in late Five Dynasties to early Song period. In other words, these inscriptions claim that the albums were based on Huang Quan's bird-and-flower paintings and reproduced them in this embroidered format. We do not know if they were claimed to be Song embroideries during the late Ming, but at least since the time of Zhu Qiqian's catalogue they were treated as Song embroideries.⁴² Nevertheless, as I have discussed elsewhere, based on detailed stylistic analyses of their compositions, motifs, and color palettes, these two albums, in fact, share many stylistic elements with some of the bird-and-flower leaves in the *Song Yuan mingji fangce*, and with three embroidery albums of birds and flowers in the Liaoning Provincial Museum, one of which is signed by Han Ximeng.⁴³ Although the quality of the two NPM albums is not as good as Han Ximeng's works, it is certain that either they were modelled on her works or they shared the embroidery patterns with Han. Thus, they are closely related to the practice of Han Ximeng or the Gu family workshop. Moreover, these two albums utilized essentially the same marketing strategy as did the *Song Yuan mingji fangce*; that is, the claim that their visual sources were works by the ancient master Huang Quan. Although they were not intended to be fakes, they responded to the late Ming literati's demand for painterly Song embroidery.

Not only did Gu family members emphasize that their embroidery was copied or modeled on Song and Yuan master paintings, but also their literati friends and critics recognized the 'painting-like' quality of Gu family embroidery. For example, Dong Qichang wrote several colophons for Han Ximeng's works. The colophon (Figure 8) in the Shanghai album reads:

Ms. Han's spouse is Lüxian [style name of Gu Shouqian], a gentleman of talent. He studied landscape painting with me, yet he is particularly good at figure and flower-and-bird painting. It is indeed [the case] that the pupil excels the teacher just as ice derives from water but it is colder than water. Ms. Han's embroideries are colorful and magnificent, and use excellent silk. Her work is so fine that her peers cannot compete with her. Now I begin to understand that the legendary genius Guo Pu's three-foot brocade [a metaphor for his talent] not only was cut and used up by Jiang Yan in his dream, but also was obtained by these women using their needles. The cosmic element of spiritual beauty is indeed not monopolized by the male. Viewing this album, [I surmise that Ms. Han's work]

⁴² Zhu Qiqian (c. 1928b), *juan* 3, p. 1.

⁴³ This was first pointed out in Huang Yifen 黄逸芬 (2002), pp. 78-81, and later confirmed by Tong Wen'e 童文娥 (2010).

surpasses Huang Quan and his son's bird-and-flower painting that were drawn from life. It looks like a painting, but when an expert inspects it closely, only then he realizes that it is women's needlework. [She is] so dexterous that her work rivals the work of nature. Marvelous! Marvelous!

韓媛之耦為旅仙，才士也。山水師予，而人物花卉尤擅冰寒之譽。繡采絢麗，良絲點染精工，遂使同儕不能望見顏色。始知郭景純三尺錦，不獨江淹夢中割截都盡，又為女郎輩針鋒收之。其靈秀之氣，信不獨鍾於男子。觀此冊，有過於黃荃父子之寫生。望之似書畫，當行家迫察之，乃知為女紅者。人巧極，天工錯。奇矣，奇矣。⁴⁴

This colophon is dated to 1636, the last year of Dong Qichang's life. Dong Qichang started by praising Gu Shouqian's talent and skill and used an anecdote that was favored by the literati about the medieval literary prodigy Jiang Yan 江淹 (444-505) to compliment the female ingenuity of Han Ximeng. Jiang Yan was a prolific poet in his youth, but later in life he had difficulty in producing good poetry. It is said that he had a dream in which he encountered a man self-identified as Zhang Xie 張協 (Jingyang 景陽, fl. 295), a literary genius of earlier times. Zhang said, "I have left a piece of brocade with you, now you can return it to me." Jiang searched and found only a couple feet of brocade in his bosom, and gave it back to Zhang. The man was angry and said, "How could it be all cut and used up!" He looked at Qiu Chi 丘遲 (464-508), a junior fellow poet of Jiang Yan, saying "Only few feet left, and I have no use of it. I give it to you."⁴⁵ Here Dong Qichang mixed up this anecdote with another one also about Jiang Yan. It is said that Jiang in another dream was asked by Guo Pu 郭璞 (Jingchun 景純, 276-324) to return the brush that Guo had left for him. After returning the brush, Jiang was no longer able to compose good poems. In both anecdotes, Jiang Yan and all the other figures are paragons of male literary genius, and the brocade and brush were traditional symbols of literary talent. It is extraordinary that Dong Qichang in the above colophon used the brocade anecdote to praise the talent of female embroiderers. It is

⁴⁴ It is important to note that although this colophon has often been cited in modern research to demonstrate how master Dong Qichang admired Han Ximeng's superb artistic achievement, almost all have failed to transcribe the entire colophon correctly and hence never really fully understood it. The most common and fatal error occurs at the part about "Guo Jingchun" 郭景純 (which has often been incorrectly transcribed as "lang jing neng" 廊景能 and does not make any sense), where Dong himself also made a mistake. See discussions below.

⁴⁵ For Jiang Yan's biography, see *Nan shi* (1983), *juan* 59, *liezhuan* 49, pp. 1a-7a. See p. 6b for the anecdote about Zhang Xie and Jiang Yan, and pp. 6b-7a for Jiang and Guo Pu.

also extraordinary that Dong compared Han Ximeng, a female embroiderer, with the great male masters of literature and art of the past, such as the bird-and-flower painters Huang Quan and his son in this colophon and the Song dynasty literatus painter and connoisseur Mi Fu 米芾 (1051-1107) in another colophon on an album leaf in the Palace Museum.⁴⁶

For Dong Qichang, the most extraordinary quality of Gu Family embroidery was its apparent deceptiveness: It looks like a painting, but when you inspect it closely, it is actually needlework. Certainly this is a literary rhetorical device that Dong used as praise, but it also bespeaks the 'painting-like' quality of Gu Family embroidery.

Gu Family embroidery was well received because of this painterly quality. For example, in the Chongzhen edition of the *Songjiang fuzhi* (1630), when Gu Family embroidery was first recorded, the editor Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558-1639) in writing about changes in local textile production noted:

In the past, there were floss embroidery and Kesi silk tapestry. Now finely split thread is used in embroidery, which produces painting-like liveliness. Sometimes peacock feathers were used to embroider grasses and insects. ... The Gu Family embroidery has one-foot square silk sheets with birds and flowers, and perfume pouches with human figures. Their depictions are meticulous and skillful. This is not available in other prefectures.
舊有絨線、有刻絲，今用劈線為之，寫生如畫。間有用孔雀毛為草蟲者。... 顧繡斗方作花鳥，香囊作人物；刻畫精巧，為他郡所未有。⁴⁷

Here Chen Jiru identifies Gu Family embroidery's technical innovations in using finer split thread, peacock feathers for special effects, and achieving painting-like quality, as their contribution to the production of local prestige in late Ming Shanghai.

The Qing dynasty scholar Yang Eryou 楊二酉 (1705-1780?, *jinshi* 1733) wrote more clearly about Gu Family embroidery's ability to conceal the traces of the embroidery needle in order to create painting-like effects. In his 1756 colophon to the Han Ximeng album now in Liaoning Provincial Museum, he stated:

After Su Ruolan created the silk-woven palindrome,⁴⁸ the potentiality of womanly work reached its pinnacle. ...

⁴⁶ Dong Qichang allegedly wrote colophons for each leaf of Han Ximeng's *Song Yuan mingji fangce*. On the facing leaf to "Landscape in the 'Mi Family' Style," the colophon compares Han to Mi Fu. See Shanghai bowuguan (2007), p. 30 for a color plate of the colophon.

⁴⁷ *Songjiang fuzhi* (1630), *juan* 7, p. 26b.

Those like Ruolan who can create and plan [a complex design] and arrange and execute it [accurately to the degree of] not missing a single thread or hair, how inspirational and intelligent they are! From this I know that when the pure and gentle vital energy (*qingshu zhi qi*) of the cosmos occurs in females, [their work] can even replace the work of nature, and the superb quality [of their work] exceeds [that of nature]. Embroidery is but a trivial skill. Those gentry women started to learn it from childhood and applied it to clothing, and some people take embroidery as nothing but fancy decoration. In recent times there appeared the Gu family in Sujun [Suzhou; sic.] who started to make embroidery paintings. Whether their subject matters are human figures or birds or flowers or insects or fish, all have subtle shading of colors, and they are able to conceal the traces of the needle and threads to the extent that one cannot tell whether it is a work of embroidery or a painting. When embroidery reaches such a [high] level, what more can be added?! ... [These leaves] depict floral sprays and small scenes, but [they vividly reflect] the turn of the branches and leaves, the front and the back of the petals and pistils, capturing the true nature of the plants. Also they are without [meretricious or vulgar] smoke and fire. Indeed no one can achieve this except for the Gu family ladies. This further proves that natural talents are extremely rare in this world, but once they are born, they can use even trivial skills to make a name in the world. This is especially the case for the embroiderers who use silk threads to set the warp and weft of the world into order, to make magnificent brocades, and to patch splendid dragon robes.⁴⁹ How could Heaven let [these talents] live in oblivion for long?

⁴⁸ It is said that Su Hui 蘇蕙 (style name Ruolan, b. c. 320), composed a palindrome (*huiwen shi* 回文詩) and wove it in silk in radiant colors, which was then sent off to her husband, Dou Tao 竇滔, at the frontier. Whether one read it clockwise, counter-clock-wise, or diagonally, and wherever one starts to read, it reads as poem. The verse was later known as the Xuanji Diagram 璇璣圖. For a detailed account of Su Hui's story, see Chang and Saussy (eds.) (1999), pp. 669-671; Lee and Stefanowska (eds.) (2007), pp. 336-338.

⁴⁹ Here Yang Eryou used two textile-related metaphors—"the warp and weft" and "mending the dragon robe"—to refer respectively to the ruler's regulation of the affairs of the world and the official's remonstrance of his superior. See further discussions below.

自蘇氏若蘭手製迴文，而女紅之能事畢矣。... 如若蘭者，創造規模，經營布置，不爽絲髮，其靈心夙慧，為何如也。是知天地清淑之氣鍾於女子，亦可以奪造化之工，而窮奇極妙為不可及。刺繡一道，小技也。閨秀輩童而習之，著之衣袂，有以為絢綵飾觀已耳。近世有蘇郡顧氏出，始作畫幅。凡人物翎毛花木蟲魚之類，淺深濃淡無不如意，並無針痕縷迹，使人不辨為繡為畫也。繡至此，蔑以加矣。... 雖俱折枝小景，而枝葉翻正、花蕊向背，真得寫生三昧，又無煙火氣，信非顧氏不能。益徵天生奇才，曠代一遇，即小技尚可以名世。況夫絲綸在手，經緯天地，可以製美錦而補華衰者。天豈令鬱鬱久居此乎？⁵⁰

In this long colophon, Yang Eryou attributed women's talent in embroidery to the endowment of the pure and the gentle humor of the cosmos, a common literary topos that late Ming literati started to use to praise female talent in literature and the arts. During the late Ming period there was a further development in which embroidery skills and innovation were venerated as a quintessential female talent. Women's great skill in embroidery was attributed to the fact that they alone were endowed with this heavenly gift, which enabled them to design complex patterns and stitch them accordingly. Technical innovations in embroidery were taken as a sign of female talent. The late Ming popular recognition of talented women created a favorable atmosphere for the reception of Gu Family embroidery.

Recent scholarship on Chinese women has indicated that during the late Ming and early Qing dynasty, women, especially elite women, enjoyed relatively more freedom of creative expression than did their counterparts in previous periods.⁵¹ This transformation first reflected the popular recognition of talented women during this period in the field of literature, painting, and embroidery. During the Ming and Qing periods, more than two thousand female poets published their own anthologies.⁵² Although there were female writers and poets throughout Chinese history, no other dynasty or period had seen so many talented women devoted to literature. This of course cannot be separated from the support of male literati, who actively collected, edited, and published the works of female poets. At first these male literati were often those who were not successful in the civil service examinations and felt that they were marginalized. Thus they were sympathetic with and hence paid special attention to those female poets who were also marginalized in the male dominant literati culture.⁵³ Some

⁵⁰ See Shanghai bowuguan (2007), p. 113 for color plate of this colophon.

⁵¹ Ko (1994).

⁵² Sun Kangyi 孫康宜 (2001), p. 136.

⁵³ Sun Kangyi (2001), pp. 137-138.

(for example, Zhong Xing 鍾惺, Zhao Shijie 趙世杰, and Zou Yi 鄒漪) went one step further to contrast the pure and the gentle quality of the feminine with the murky, pragmatic and political male world. Women because of their purity are more suited to spontaneous poetic expression.⁵⁴ The theory that “the cosmic element of spiritual beauty is monopolized by the female” became popular in literati discourse.⁵⁵ Zhao Shijie (seventeenth century), in his preface to his *Lady Scholars from Past and Present* (*Gujin Nüshi* 古今女史, 1628), stated that “Within the four seas, spiritual beauty probably has been known to occur not in males but in females” 海內靈秀，或不鍾男子而鍾女人。⁵⁶ In *Sequel to the Literary Collection of the Jade Terrace* (*Xu yutai wenyuan* 續玉臺文苑; preface dated 1632), Ge Zhengqi 葛徵奇 (?-1645, *jinshi* 1628) wrote in his preface, “Not only is the cosmic element of spiritual beauty not monopolized by men, but also the field of literature in the universe should belong to women” 非以天地靈秀之氣，不鍾於男子；若將宇宙文字之場，應屬乎婦人。⁵⁷ This view of the female quality was soon adopted by many other male literati and became a trope. Even Dong Qichang, who probably had a more conservative attitude on the issue of women writing, also responded to this contemporary view. In his colophon to Han Ximeng’s works after praising female talent, he wrote: “The cosmic element of spiritual beauty is indeed not monopolized by the male.” Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608-1647), who was the patron and supporter of female talents such as Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618-1664), readily recognized Han Ximeng’s works. In his long colophon, he compared Han Ximeng’s works with Song embroidery and considered that Han’s works surpassed those of the Song. In his colophon written in 1639 in the Shanghai album, he noted:

The Song people had hair embroidery and silk embroidery, such as the ‘Epang Palace’ and the ‘Tengwang

⁵⁴ According to Sun Kangyi’s analysis, the Ming-Qing male literati employed two strategies to raise the status of female poets: first, they emphasized the long tradition of female literary creation and linked it to the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes) and the *Lisao* 離騷 (Departing in Sorrow). Second, they credited females with the quality of *qing* 情 (emotion, love) and linked it with *qing* 清 (purity) as seen in poetry aesthetics. See Sun Kangyi (2001), pp. 138-144, also Wilt Idema and Beata Grant (2004), p. 350.

⁵⁵ Zheng Peikai 鄭培凱 and Gōyama Kiwamu 合山究 are among the first to notice and trace this phenomenon. See Zheng Peikai (1987); Gōyama Kiwamu (1983).

⁵⁶ Hu Wenkai 胡文楷 (1985), p. 889. For English translation of Zhao’s entire preface, see Chang and Saussy (eds.) (1999), pp. 748-750.

⁵⁷ Ge Zhengqi, “Xu Yutai wenyuan xu” 續玉臺文苑序, in *Xu Yutai wenyuan* (1997), p. 2b. Ge’s preface was also collected in Hu Wenkai (1985), p. 887.

Pavilion.' All [these subjects come from the tradition] of ruler-lined painting, and they were easy to structure. However, Ms. Han's [embroidered] birds and flowers and insects are full of vigor and life and in multiple colors. Even Xue Yelai and Su Huilan could not reach this level of ingenuity. Is this perhaps the appearance of the legendary 'Heavenly Weaver Girl' in this world? Lüxian is the grandson of Longhai [i.e. Gu Mingshi], Assistant Minister of the Office of Seals, and excels in both painting and poetry. His relationship with his spouse Ms. Han is no less than that of the Old Man of the Pine-Snow [i.e. Zhao Mengfu] and his wife Guan Daosheng. Their second son, [Gu] Kai, has long been famous for his learning in history and is admired among his colleagues in our society. Isn't it that even the heavenly weaver did not know that the Shu Rivers could create the splendid wonder? This album will circulate in the world; how people will admire and enjoy it!

宋人有髮繡、絲繡，如阿房宮、滕王閣，皆架畫觚稜，尤易拈[=結]構。若韓媛花鳥草蟲，生氣迴動，五色爛發，即薛夜來、蘇蕙蘭未能妙[=妙]詣至此。或天孫織錦手出現人間耶？旅仙為上璽龍海先生文孫，詩壇畫苑最稱擅長。其儷韓夫人，不減松雪翁之有管道昇矣。次子楷，夙負史學，為吾社所推。豈靈漢機絲，又不知有蜀江水濯出奇麗也。此冊留傳海內，當如何欽翫。⁵⁸

Chen Zilong here employed several common literary topoi that scholars and collectors often used to praise Gu Family embroidery. First Chen contrasted it with Song embroidery. Then he compared Han Ximeng with talented females known for their skills in women's work: Xue Lingyun 薛靈芸 (Yelai; fl. 220-226),⁵⁹ Su Hui (Ruolan), and even with the legendary 'Heavenly Weaver Girl.' He then invoked the story of Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262-1319) and Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254-1322) as comparison to Han Ximeng and Gu Shouqian.⁶⁰ Chen also accounted the important social

⁵⁸ See Shanghai bowuguan (2007), p. 103 for color plate of this colophon.

⁵⁹ Xue Lingyun, a concubine of emperor Wen of the Wei Kingdom (r. 220-226), is said to have been able to sew in the dark. The emperor thus changed her name to 'Yelai' 夜來 and she was venerated as 'god of the needle'. See *Shiyiji* (1983), *juan* 7, p. 2b. Lingyun was often invoked in the Ming-Qing times. For instance, the famous late-Ming courtesan Xue Susu 薛素素 was also compared with Lingyun. See Ko (1994), pp. 267-268.

⁶⁰ Guan Daosheng, one of the most accomplished and well-known Chinese female artists, was married to the great Yuan painter-calligrapher Zhao Mengfu. On Guan's life and art, see Purtle (1999) and Purtle (2009). As Dorothy Ko (1994), p.

networking that the Gu family possessed in helping them get the support of local literati.

‘Ms. Han’s Embroidery’: The Subjectivity of Han Ximeng’s Guxiu

Han Ximeng’s emphasis on the independence of womanly work gives us a window into her subjectivity. On every leaf of the *Flowers and Fishes* album and virtually every embroidery painting by her, Han Ximeng embroidered a red seal of ‘Ms. Han’s womanly work’ (*Han shi nügong* 韓氏女紅) (Figure 9). It is not a common practice for handicraft products to be signed by the makers. As crafts were not traditionally viewed as fine arts in China, authorship was usually not emphasized. As a result, although China is famous for its huge amount of handicrafts, rarely do we see the names of the artisans inscribed in the works of their hand with the exception of the late Ming. Historically on the rare occasions when we do have the maker’s name on objects, it was usually for the purpose of tracking responsibility rather than honoring the makers, such as the inscriptions on Warring States and Qin-Han lacquer wares. During later periods, the self-awareness and subjectivity of the artisans seems to have risen and artists began to sign their names on their works. The way in which these artists ‘signed’ their works seems to have been influenced by the new practice seen in the painting field and exhibited a certain degree of self-consciousness. Such was the case of painter Guo Xi’s 郭熙 (1020-1090) signature on *Early Spring* (dated 1072; National Palace Museum, Taipei), one of the earliest examples of the (then) new practice among painters of the Northern Song dynasty. Guo Xi left a clear title-date-name inscription, against a blank part of his painting where it is easily seen.

Han Ximeng signed her works in the same manner as painters did: On *Waterweeds and Shrimps* (Figure 10) from the Shanghai Museum album, she wrote with ink and brush the inscription “In the eighth month of year of

313, pointed out, in Ming-Qing period, Guan and Zhao was often cited as “an example of companionate marriage between a man of letters and a talented wife.” Here the comparison was doubly meaningful as the Gu family had tried to build a special bond between themselves and Zhao Mengfu: According to a contemporary literatus Zhu Chaqing 朱察卿 (1524-1572), the Gu family garden was named after a rock surfaced during the construction, which bore the characters of ‘Luxiang chi’ 露香池 (dew fragrance pond) and were allegedly written by Zhao Mengfu. Since this account was written at the request of Gu Mingshi 顧名世 (1508-1588), the master of the garden, this connection with Zhao was more likely a deliberate construction than fact. For the account of the garden, see *Zhu Bangxian ji* (1997), *juan* 6, p. 12a.

xinsi (1641), embroidered at Xiaocangzhou. Ms. Han Ximeng." Seven years earlier on the last leaf of the album *Song Yuan mingji fangce*, she wrote the title of the work, the painter she was emulating, and her own name. These are certainly done after painting practice, but what Han Ximeng wishes to convey seems to be more than an imitation of a male practice.

Of all the album leaves that Han Ximeng made, she usually inscribed only one leaf in each album, yet embroidered her 'Ms. Han's womanly work' seal on every leaf.⁶¹ This indicates that the seal is probably a deliberate choice and deserves further investigation. First, instead of leaving just her name, '*Han shi nügong*' not only declares the existence of Han Ximeng the maker but also emphasizes the status of *nügong* womanly work. Second, as indicated in the above discussion, one major goal of Han Ximeng's technical innovations, from splitting threads into finer filaments, using more intermediate colors, developing new stitches, to employing ink and color onto the embroidered work, is to intensify the painting-like quality of her embroidery, to the degree that the viewer "cannot tell whether it is a work of embroidery or a painting." However, just when the viewer is about to mistake her work for painting, the '*Han shi nügong*' seal reminds the viewer that it is a piece of embroidery. That is exactly why Dong Qichang remarked in his colophon in the Shanghai Museum album: "It looks like a painting, but when an expert inspects it closely, and only then he realizes that it is woman's needlework. [She is] so dexterous that her work rivals the work of nature. Marvelous! Marvelous!" Obviously Han Ximeng was extremely confident of her work. Not only could her embroideries compete with paintings by ancient masters but they also could surpass them. Moreover, they are works created by women. In other words, although Han Ximeng may have taken as her point of departure copying paintings of ancient masters (as her husband has tried to convince us), she did not confine herself to it. Ultimately what she achieved was not to keep embroidery subordinate to painting, but to prove that embroidery is worthy of being an independent form of art.

The choice of the subjects that Han Ximeng embroidered also reveals her intention. One leaf in her *Song Yuan mingji fangce* depicts a lady embroidering a robe with a head of the dragon (Figure 11). What this beautiful lady is embroidering is none other than the ceremonial robe for the emperor—*gunfu* 袞服, or *longgun* 龍袞 as described by Dong Qichang in his colophon on the facing leaf (see the translation below). This image has profound literary and political meanings, which comes from two classical allusions. The first one, from a poem in the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*), is about "mending an imperial robe." The ode "Zheng Min" (Maoshi no. 260)

⁶¹ The curators of Shanghai Museum have compiled a table of all the extant '*Han shi nügong*' seals. See Shanghai bowuguan (ed.) (2007), Appendix IV, pp. 217-218.

speaks of the loyal minister Zhong Shanfu 仲山父 admonishing King Xuan 宣王 of the Western Zhou dynasty metaphorically as “When the robe of state was in holes/It was Zhong Shanfu alone who mended it.”⁶² But here in Han Ximeng’s work, more significantly, it is a woman who is mending the imperial robe rather than a male minister. Han Ximeng’s use of this classical metaphor probably is not meant to predict modern feminist’s position of women’s role in the political realm, rather she emphasized that embroidery is not a “trivial skill” but plays an important role in Chinese social and political life.

The second classical reference is related specifically to the function of embroidery. According to the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), six of the twelve imperial emblems (*shier zhang* 十二章) were embroidered onto the imperial robe.⁶³ This system was adopted at least as early as the Eastern Han period (25-220) and was implemented through successive dynasties (although details have changed many times regarding the number, the combination, and the order of these emblems).⁶⁴ For the educated viewers of Ming and Qing, both references are obvious and significant, as is attested in the above-mentioned colophon by Yang Eryou. When commenting on another work by Han Ximeng, he used similar metaphors and described embroiderers as those who “use silk threads to set the warp and weft of the world into order, to make magnificent brocades and to patch up splendid dragon robes.” Thus the political connotation of Han Ximeng’s work is obvious. And Dong Qichang also got it right. In a verse colophon on the page facing this Embroidering Lady, he wrote:

The dragon robe is splendid, but if there is no snag why
should it be mended?
Our lord’s regalia were woven by the Heavenly Weaver.
Magnificent the five colored silk threads, shining eternally.
So beautiful is that lady, who is really assisting the lord.

⁶² Waley (2005), p. 142.

⁶³ This came from a legendary conversation between Emperor Shun and Yu about the imperial emblems painted and embroidered on the robe. See Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 and Liu Qiyu 劉起野 (2005), pp. 440-441, 446-449, and 504.

⁶⁴ In late Ming, for example, six emblems (the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountain, the dragon, and the flowery fowl) were woven on the upper garment while another six (the flames, the temple cup, the aquatic grass, the grains of rice, the hatchet, and the symbol of rank) embroidered on the lower garment. For the changes of the system over time, see Cui Guishun 崔圭順 (2007). As there exists no corroborating textual or material evidence, it is not clear how the situation was in the Zhou dynasty, and hence difficult to judge whether this system indeed began in the Zhou dynasty (or even earlier).

龍袞煌煌，不闕何補。
 我后之章，天孫是組。
 璀璨五絲，照耀千古。
 變兮彼姝，實姿藻黼。⁶⁵

Embroidery for Han Ximeng was definitely not just a “minor skill” or a pastime. And it probably assumed a more important role in bringing income to a frustrated literati family. This leaf, I think, could be read as a preface to Han Ximeng’s work, if we consider the *Song Yuan mingji fangce* as a book, in which she asserted her position as an active contributor to the family finances in difficult times. Gu Family embroidery did serve men by producing luxury art objects to satisfy male literati taste for painting-like embroidery. Gu Family embroidery did serve the community of Songjiang, by bringing fame and cultural prestige as a unique local product. But I think more importantly to Han Ximeng were the success of her efforts in innovating embroidery techniques so as to make embroidery more ‘painting-like,’ and her achievements in eventually going beyond male literati taste, emphasizing the special qualities and textures of embroidery as a medium, and being recognized at producing embroidered images which were admired as “surpassing paintings.”

Had Han Ximeng not signed the works with her name and seals, we would not be able to identify the extant Gu Family embroidery, and make the connection between the few literary descriptions and their real works of art. From this perspective, it is indeed very bold of Han Ximeng to sign many of her works with the embroidered seal ‘Ms. Han’s womanly work.’

The artist’s intentions are difficult to access, especially for an art of the past when there is no artist’s statement to consult, no one to interview, no personal diaries or documents to investigate. From the few signed works by Han Ximeng that we have, and the circumstantial evidence of the cultural milieu in which she lived, we began to see a corner of a faded picture in which female artists, such as Han Ximeng, tried to use their talent to express themselves and contribute to their family and community. And I am confident that Han Ximeng is not an isolated example. Further research will reveal more female talents like Han Ximeng and retell the stories that have long been hidden under the dominant social structure.

⁶⁵ For color plate of this colophon, see Shanghai bowuguan (2007), p. 29.

Figures

Figure 1. *Shakyamuni Preaching on the Vulture Peak*, embroidery, Tang dynasty, excavated from the hidden library, Dunhuang, 241 cm x 159 cm, British Museum.



SOURCE: Zhao Feng (ed.), *Dunhuang sichou yishu quanji, Ying cang juan* (Shanghai: Donghua daxue chubanshe, 2007), p. 215.
For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

Figure 2. Detail of *Shakyamuni Preaching on the Vulture Peak*.



SOURCE: Zhao Feng (ed.), *Dunhuang sichou yishu quanji, Ying cang juan*, p. 214.

For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

Figure 3. *Female Immortal Riding a Crane to the Jade Terrace*, embroidery, Southern Song, 25.1 cm x 27.4 cm, Liaoning Provincial Museum.



SOURCE: Gao Hanyu and Bao Mingxin (eds.), *Zhongguo lidai zhi ran xiu tulu* (Xianggang: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), plate 57, p. 84.
For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

Figure 4. Han Ximeng, *Fish at Play*, from the album *Flowers and Fishes*, dated 1641, 30.3 cm x 23.9 cm, the Shanghai Museum.



SOURCE: Shanghai bowuguan (ed.), *Haishang jinxiu: Guxiu zhenpin teji* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), p. 100.

For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

Figure 5. Gu Family Embroiderers' creative use of couching stitch
(*dingxian xiu* 釘線繡).

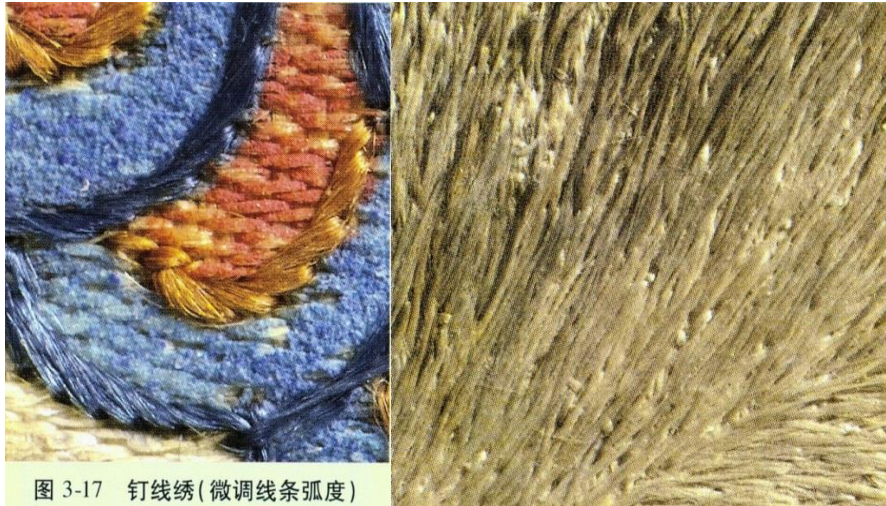


图 3-17 钉线绣(微调线条弧度)

SOURCE: Bao Yanli and Yu Ying, *Guxiu* (Suzhou daxue chubanshe, 2009), p. 92.

For the pictures in color see the online edition of EASTM.

**Figure 6. Han Ximeng, *Flower and Butterfly*,
from the album *Flowers and Fishes*.**



SOURCE: Shanghai bowuguan (ed.), *Haishang jinxiu: Guxiu zhenpin teji*, p. 98.

For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

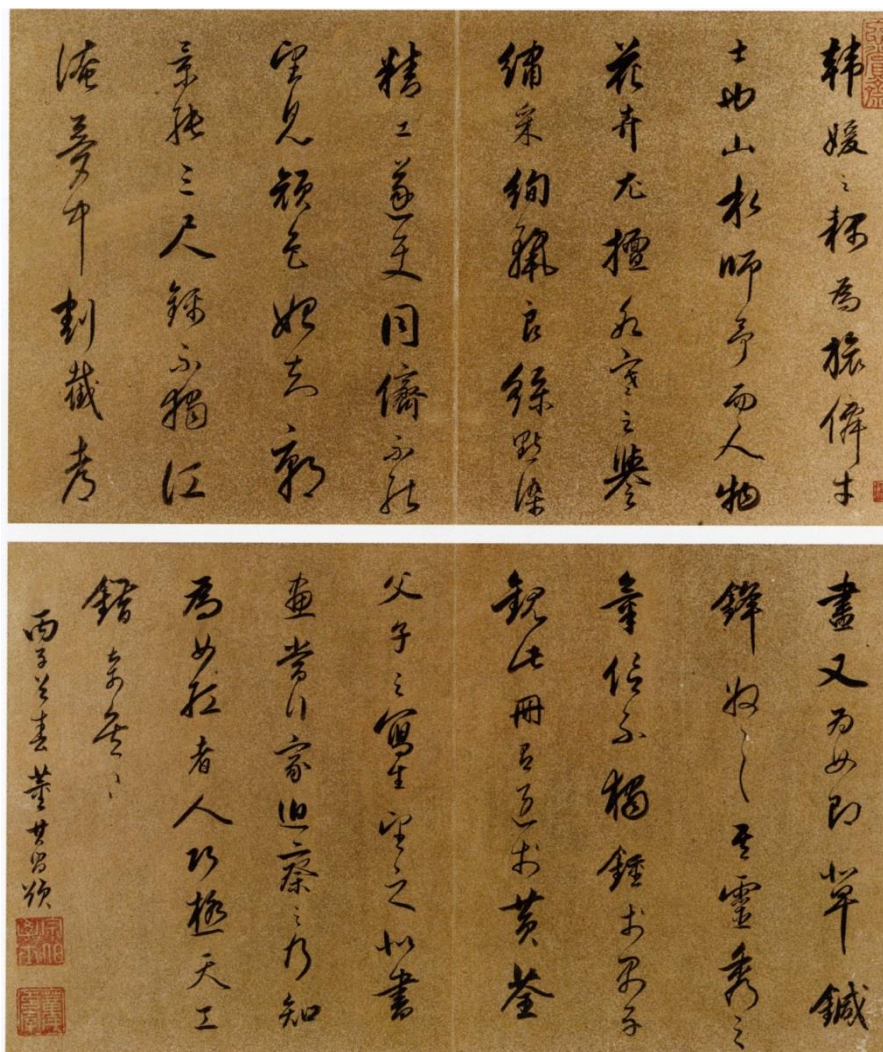
Figure 7. Detail of Han Ximeng, *Flower and Butterfly*.



SOURCE: Bao Yanli and Yu Ying, *Guxiu* (Suzhou: Suzhou daxue chubanshe, 2009), p. 106, fig. 3-38.

For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

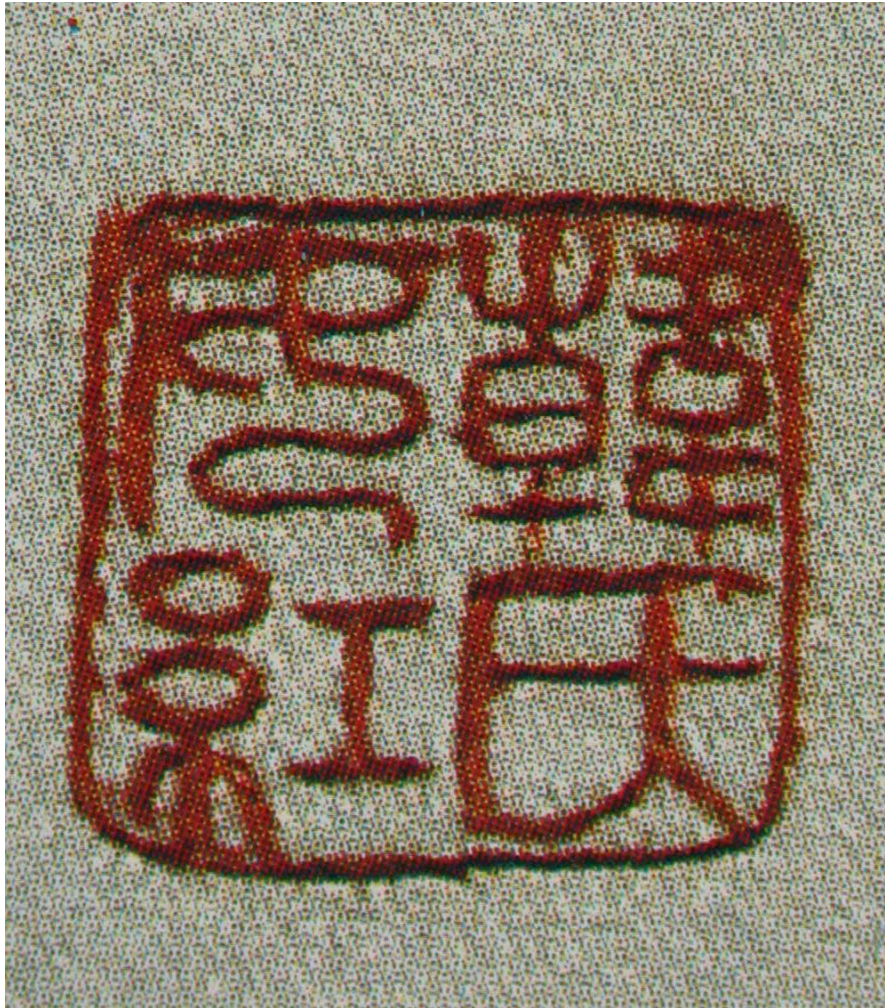
Figure 8. Dong Qichang, colophon to Han Ximeng's embroidery, dated 1636, now in the album *Flowers and Fishes*.



SOURCE: Shanghai bowuguan (ed.), *Haishang jinxiu: Guxiu zhenpin teji*, p. 102.

For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

Figure 9. Han Ximeng, 'Ms. Han's Womanly Work' (*Han shi nügong* 韓氏女紅) embroidered seal, from the album *Flowers and Fishes*.



SOURCE: Shanghai bowuguan (ed.), *Haishang jinxiu: Guxiu zhenpin teji*, p. 101.

For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

Figure 10. Han Ximeng, *Waterweeds and Shrimps*, from the album *Flowers and Fishes*.



SOURCE: Shanghai bowuguan (ed.), *Haishang jinxiu: Guxiu zhenpin teji*, p. 101.

For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

Figure 11. Han Ximeng, *Embroidering Lady*, detail, from *Album [of Eight Embroideries] of Famous Song and Yuan Paintings* (*Song Yuan mingji fangce*), dating to 1634, 33 cm x 25 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

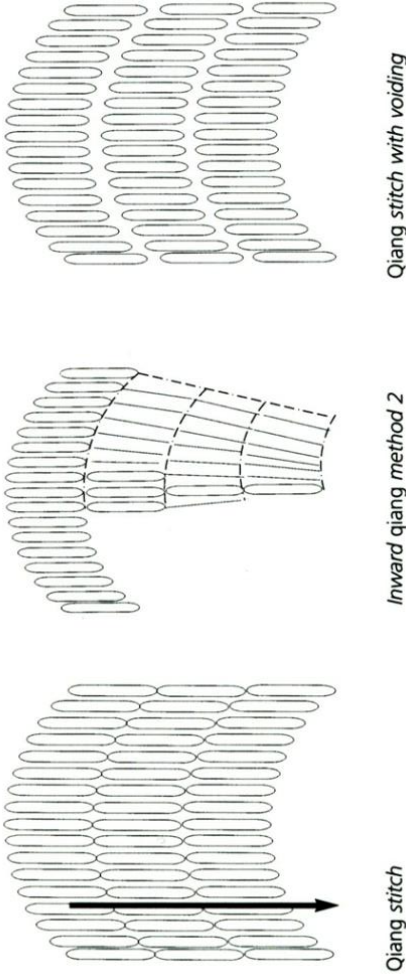


SOURCE: Shanghai bowuguan (ed.) (2007), *Haishang jinxiu: Guxiu zhenpin teji*, p. 9.

For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

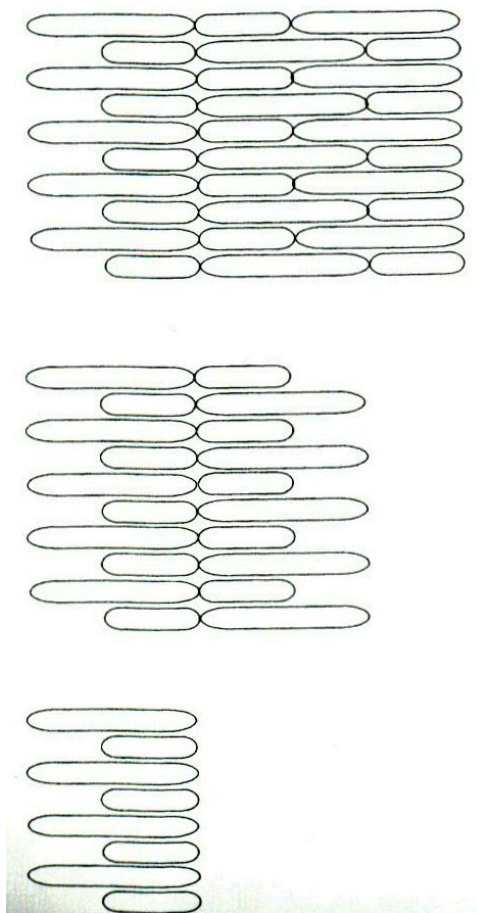
Diagrams

Diagram 1. Encroaching satin stitch (*qiang zhen* 戗針).



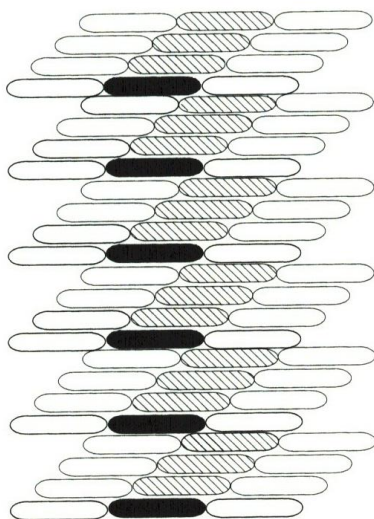
SOURCE: Josianne Bertin-Guest, *Chinese Embroidery: Traditional Techniques* (Iola, Wis.: Krauss Publications, 2003), p. 66.

Diagram 2. Single-layer shading: long-and-short stitch. (*tao zhen* 套針).



SOURCE: Josianne Bertin-Guest, *Chinese Embroidery: Traditional Techniques*, p. 61.

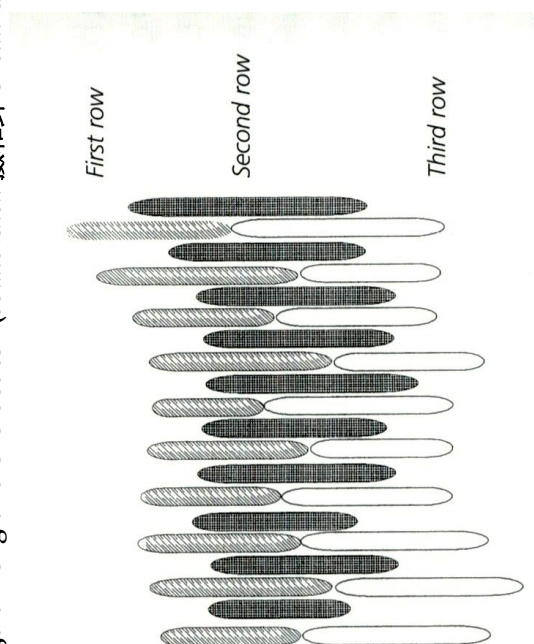
Diagram 3. Double-layer shading. (*shuangtao zhen* 雙套針).



Double layer shading: long stitches in staggered lines

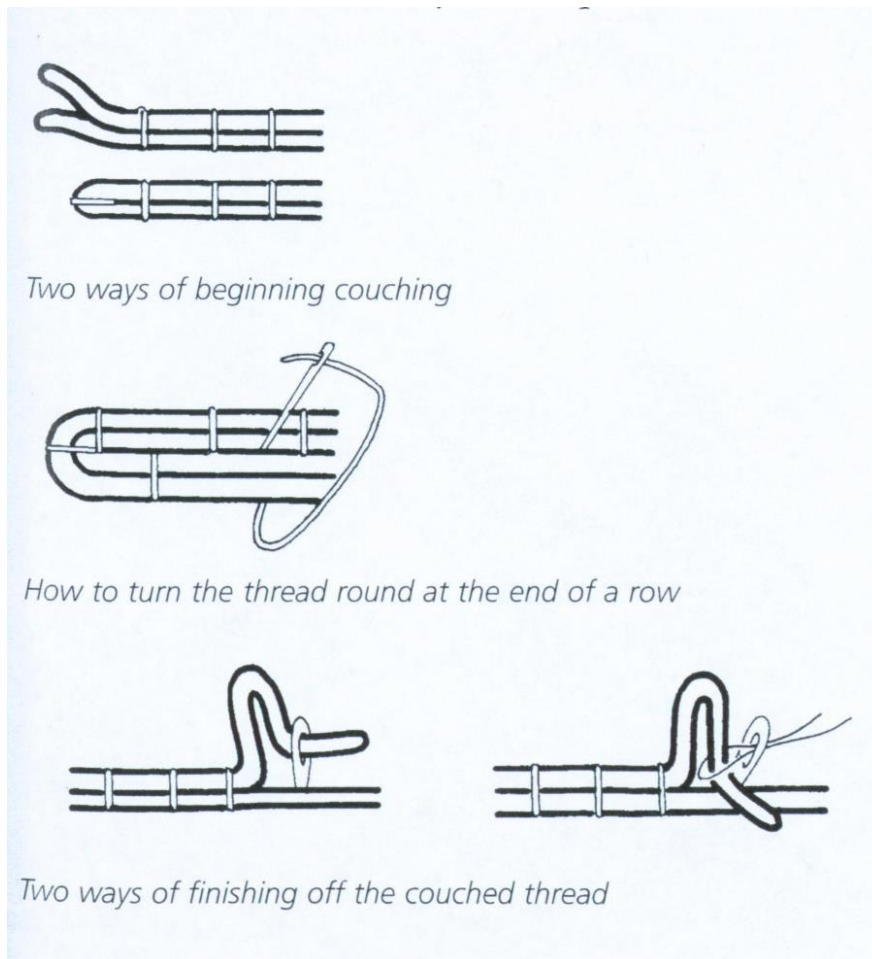
SOURCE: Josianne Bertin-Guest, *Chinese Embroidery: Traditional Techniques*, p. 61.

Diagram 4. Irregular long-and-short stitch (*souhe zhen* 撮和針 or *can zhen* 參針).



SOURCE: Josianne Bertin-Guest, *Chinese Embroidery: Traditional Techniques*, p. 64.

Diagram 5. Couching stitch (*dingxian xiu* 釘線繡 or *dingjin xiu* 釘金繡).



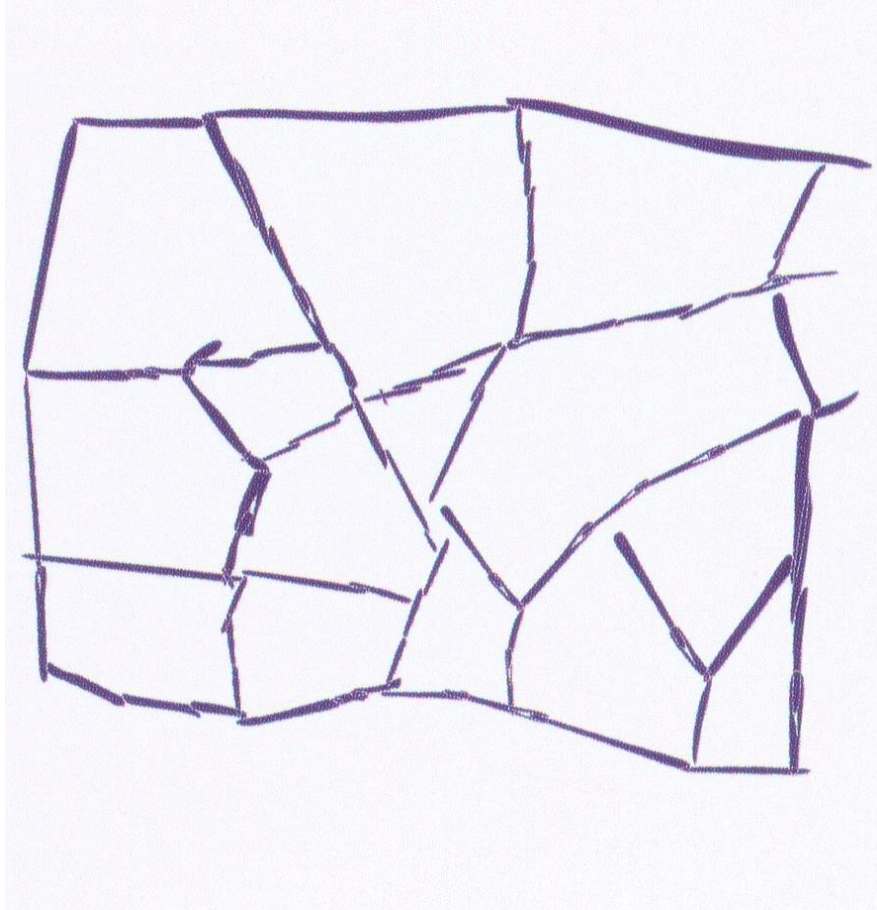
SOURCE: Josianne Bertin-Guest, *Chinese Embroidery: Traditional Techniques*, p. 95.

Diagram 6. Hairy stitch (*shi zhen* 施針 and *shimao zhen* 施毛針).



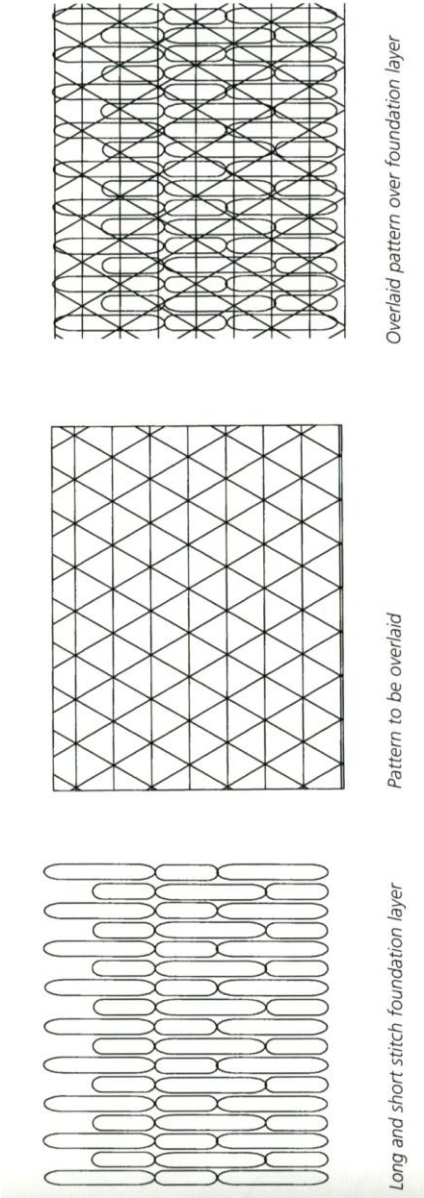
SOURCE: Shanghai bowuguan (ed.) (2007), *Haishang jinxiu*, p. 209.

Diagram 7. Crackle stitch (*bingwen zhen* 冰紋針).



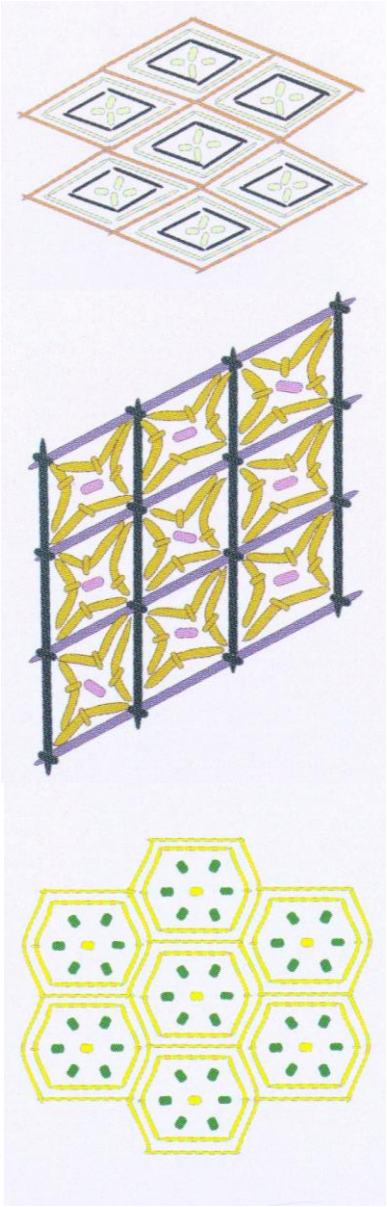
SOURCE: Shanghai bowuguan (ed.) (2007), *Haishang jinxiu*, p. 210.

Diagram 8. Overlaid stitch (*jīnwén xiū* 錦紋繡).



SOURCE: Josianne Bertin-Guest, *Chinese Embroidery: Traditional Techniques*, p. 75.

Diagram 8.1. Overlaid stitch patterns (*jinwen xiu* 錦紋繡).



SOURCE: Shanghai bowuguan (ed.) (2007), *Haishang jinxiu*, p. 213.

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